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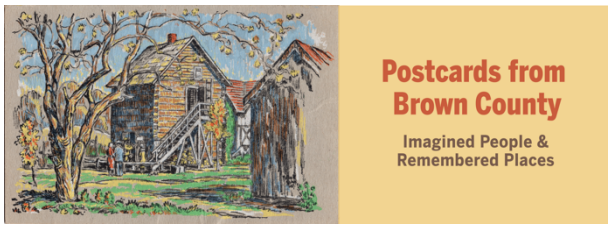
Postcards from Brown County (Exhibition)



An invited exhibition at the Brown County Art Gallery, as part of my ongoing research into the politics of cultural representation and the history of tourism and material culture in this distinctive rural community. I researched, curated and installed a small exhibition feature enlarged postcards printed on gatorboard, and placed on exhibit in the Gallery's Studio Gallery.

Introduction Label

First allowed by the postal service in 1898, postcards were an effective and affordable communication device. By the 1910s, travelers to Brown County purchased postcards to mail short messages to family and friends, as well as to take home as souvenirs from their visit. In fact, the development of tourism in Brown County and the rapid growth in popularity of postcards happened at the same time. From cyanotypes and collotypes to block prints and photo-lithography, the production of these postcards included cards created by local artists and photographers, as well as commercially printed cards manufactured in large quantities by retailers and entrepreneurs. This exhibition provides a sample of the types of postcards available to tourists in Brown County in the first decades of the 20th Century.

Brown Countians Imagined

Abe Martin (postmarked 1910)

Created by cartoonist Frank McKinney Hubbard, the wisecracking, rural sage Abe Martin became forever associated with Brown County, Indiana, the place where the fictional character was said to live. Though associated with the small town of Nashville, Abe Martin cartoons were published by the *Indianapolis News* and syndicated nationally. By 1910, Abe Martin was known throughout the United States, as evidenced by this postcard mailed from Lamar, Colorado.

Vene Schrock Dressed as Abe Martin (circa 1910)

This second postcard shows local character Sylvanus “Vene” Schrock (1860-1935) dressed up as Abe Martin to entertain outsiders. While tourists often enjoyed the humor of Abe Martin, Hubbard’s cartoons offended locals, as they often characterized Brown Countians as backwards and uneducated. Schrock capitalized on outsider interest, revealing the complex relationship between local people and outside perceptions.

Ox Team Used by an Old Soldier at Nashville, Ind. (postmarked 1914)
This third card shows Civil War veteran Joseph Lawyer and a boy riding in his oxcart. This rustic image supported notions of Brown County as a place where old-time ways persisted. Often when postcards show people from Brown County, they are presented as a vestige of Indiana's old traditional way of life.

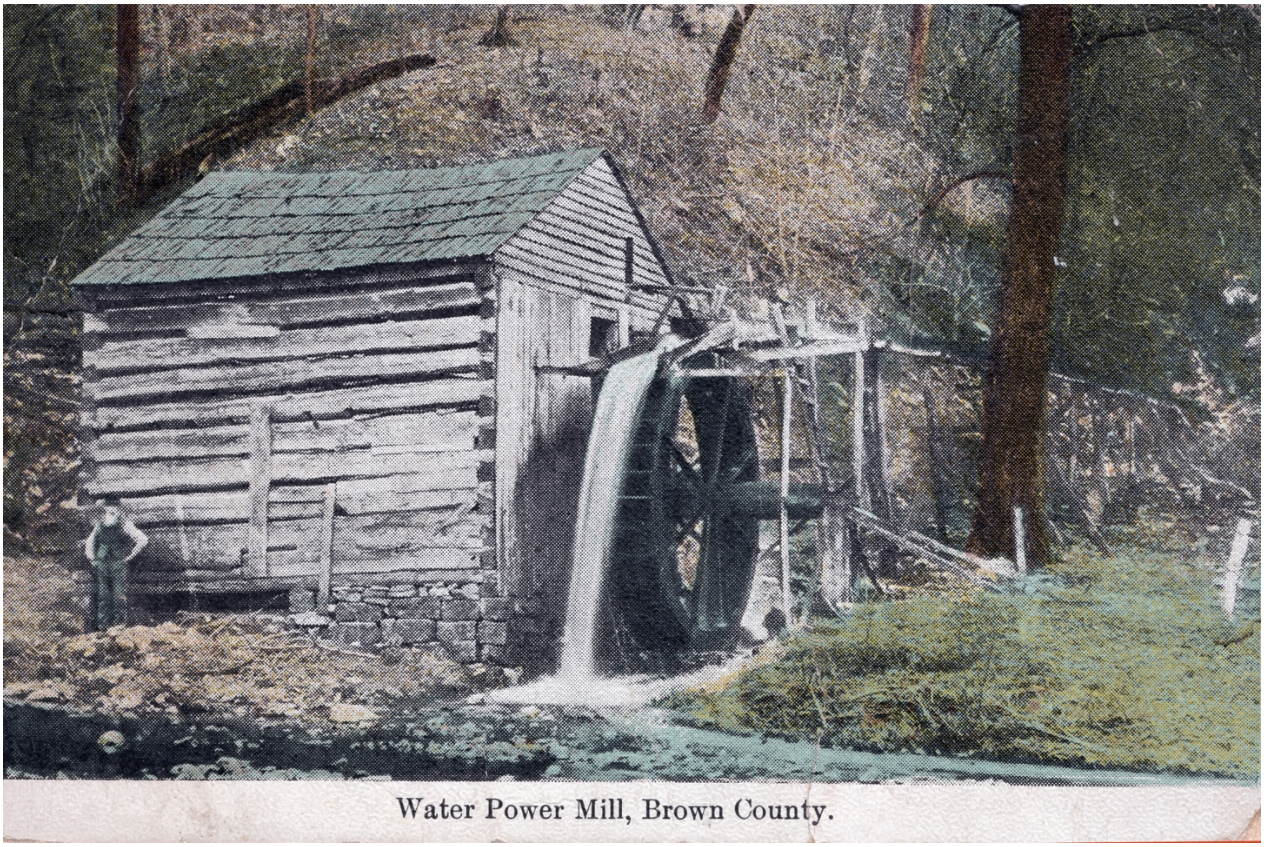
Buildings and Places

Brown County Jail, Ind (circa 1900-1910)
Perhaps the most popular subject for early tourist postcards in Brown County, the log jail was the county's first tourist destination. This very early card was made around the turn of the century, and it shows how the area surrounding the log jail has changed.

Egypt Brown County (postmarked 1914)
This unusual postcard includes a small tintype glued to cardstock. Little is known about the people and place featured here, but it appears that the log cabin had recently been constructed when the picture was made.

Birds Eye View of Nashville, Ind (circa 1910, unposted)
Made from an albumen print, this postcard includes the handwritten caption “Birds-eye view of Nashville, Ind smallest county seat in the state. Population 300.” This view from north of Nashville, captured in the first decade of the 20th Century, shows the lingering effects of deforestation in Brown County

Structures of the Past



Water Power Mill, Brown County (Postmarked 1911)
This hand-colored halftone postcard shows a log water-powered mill in Brown County. Probably spring fed, the water flowed via a slew on a trestle. As the water falls, it turns the overshot wheel. This small mill probably ground corn for locals. Though postmarked in 1911, the image was probably taken in the 1890s.

Untitled (Postmarked 1911)

This postcard shows the old Huff Mill, a popular site for early visitors to the county. A cyanotype, this image was made from a direct transfer from a photographic negative. This card is noteworthy in that it was signed and mailed from the Nashville Post office on March 26th 1907 by Louis Oscar Griffith. This would have been during the first sketching trip Griffith and other Chicago-based artists made to the county.

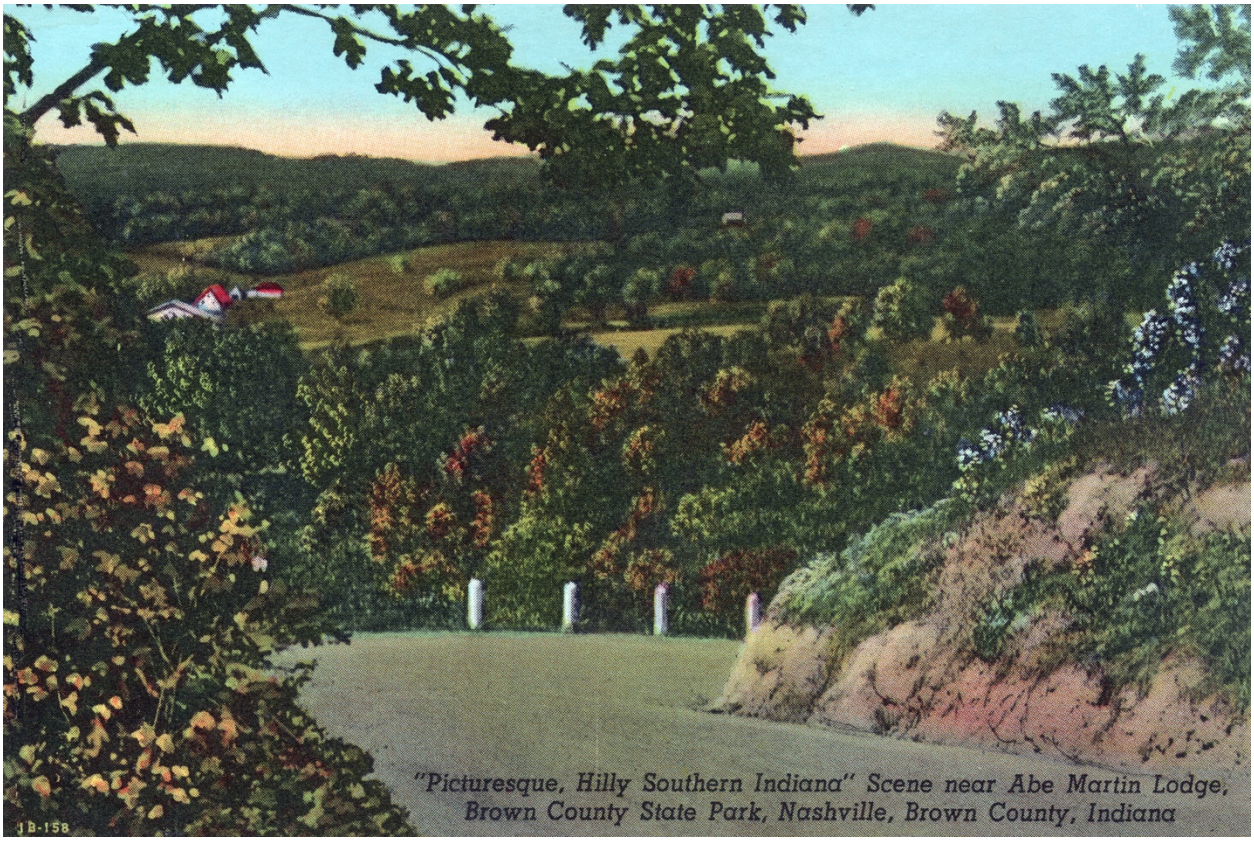
Views of Nashville

A Corner of Nashville (circa 1920, unposted)
Though the type of card suggests a later printing, this image was probably made in the 1910s. While many postcards show Nashville from the east, this is one of the few that provides a north easterly view of town. In the distance, one can see that much of what is now crowded with buildings and trees was once open meadows.

Main Street Nashville, Ind (circa 1946, unposted)

Looking east on Main Street, this postcard shows Nashville in the 1940s. From Miller's Drug Store to the IGA, the image captures a different view of downtown Nashville, both spatially and temporally. Note the boys reading outside the drug store and the woman carrying her market basket to the store. The scene demonstrates what little impact tourism still had on local life. However, signs for Shell Gasoline, Coca Cola, and Western Union reveal that the town was now linked to a national infrastructure that would transform how visitors and locals experienced life in Nashville.

Views and Visions


"Picturesque, Hilly Southern Indiana" Scene near Abe Martin Lodge,
Brown County State Park, Nashville, Brown County, Indiana

Picturesque, Hilly Southern Indiana, Scene near Abe Martin Lodge (circa 1941, unposted)
Produced for the Brown County State Park, this image was printed by Curt Teich Postcards, a Chicago-based manufacturer of lithograph postcards. The park produced a series of postcards for visitors that included images of the Lookout tower and scenes near the Abe Martin Lodge.

The Ending of Dreams, Nashville, Ind (circa 1943, unposted)
This postcard shows A.J. Rogers' original Nashville House in flames. The old antebellum structure burned in 1943, and construction on the new building did not begin until 1947. The historic structure was an early engine for tourism in the county. Its destruction was a major blow to the town and its "dream" of tourism. However, the new Nashville House proved an important replacement, and was well positioned to for a new era of auto tourism in the years after World War II.

Artisan Postcards

Untitled (circa 1935, unposted)

Postcards are more than just useful communication tools; they are also reflections of a community (real and imagined) and a creative expression of the maker and sender. This artisan postcard (circa 1935) was made by architect and Brown County Art Gallery member Frank Sohn (1888-1968). Printed with black ink on artist paper, it appears that the artist applied the blue, yellow, brown, red, green and white by hand. Compared with similar cards, one can see variation in how the image was tinted, making each subtly different.